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A Moment Immortalized

This iconic photograph from World War II, *Raising a Flag over the Reichstag*, was taken in Berlin, Germany during the Battle of Berlin on 2 May 1945 by Red Army photographer Yevgeny Khaldei (1917-1997). A piece of wartime photojournalism, it shows two soldiers planting the Soviet flag atop Germany's battered parliament building. The Soviet equivalent of United States' *Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima*, it symbolizes the historic defeat of Nazi Germany in a war that cost the Soviet Union over twenty million lives.

The importance of wartime photojournalism was summarized by General Dwight D. Eisenhower during WWII: "Public opinion wins war." Photographs can provoke a powerful emotional response, and are vital to swaying public opinion while a nation is at war. This has been true since the Civil War, when wartime photography first became possible; people accepted the content of these photographs without question (Walton, p. 994). As long as it has been feasible, photojournalists have risked, and often met, death in order to capture wartime images capable of rallying a nation.

As mentioned earlier, *Raising a Flag over the Reichstag* serves the same purpose as the similarly iconic image of U.S. marines raising the stars and stripes atop Mt. Suribachi on Iwo Jima. Both were used by their country to boost public morale back home, showing citizens that their patience and patriotism through difficult times have paid off with an undeniable image of victory. Both are powerful and awe-inspiring photos, illustrating the significance of photojournalism and truth in Eisenhower's statement.

The context of this photo is that of the last major engagement in the European theater of WWII, the Battle of Berlin in 1945. Years earlier, soon after launching an invasion of the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941, Nazi Germany had it close to capitulation. After ferocious Soviet resistance and a counteroffensive during the winter of 1941-42, however, Germany lost the initiative and was gradually pushed back to its own borders. By 16 April 1945, the Soviets had encircled its capital, Berlin, and launched a final offensive. As the Germans rabidly defended their capital, the ensuing battle was one of the bloodiest in history, with over 1.3 million casualties (Krivosheev).

Although Adolf Hitler had no use for Berlin's parliament building, the Reichstag, and it hadn't been used for this purpose since 1933, the Soviets viewed it as a symbolic objective akin to their Kremlin in Moscow, Russia. It was also a practical military objective; a sturdy 19th-century building, it had been converted to a fortress for the defense of Berlin. By 29 April the Soviets had reached the city center, containing the government quarter and Reichstag. It also contained the most elite German troops left in Berlin. The next evening, Hitler committed suicide in his nearby bunker and the Soviets blasted their way into the Reichstag building. As Soviet propaganda was fixated with the idea of capturing the Reichstag by May Day on 1 May (Beevor 2002), their troops fought furiously to capture the building and raise their flag on its roof by midnight. The roof was finally reached and a flag planted hours after midnight, but the Nazis briefly retook the building afterwards and it wasn't entirely captured until 2 May. That was when the photojournalist Khaldei recruited a few random Red Army soldiers to climb atop the Reichstag and reenact the raising of the flag, resulting in the iconic photograph.

Thus, this image is not as candid and authentic as one would initially believe. The reenactment is understandable, however: the first flag was planted at night, and combat raged on in the building until 2 May, so there was no earlier opportunity to photograph the event. Yevgeny Khaldei himself never considered his iconic image any less valid because it had been staged, neither denying nor apologizing for the reenactment. He only cared about the quality and impact of the photo, simply replying “It is a good photograph and historically significant” when questioned about its staging (Broekmeyer 2004).

However, more candidness was removed from the photograph after it was taken. Below, to the left is the original image, and to the right is that which appeared in Soviet media.

Khaldei tacitly scratched out the second wristwatch worn by the man in the lower right because it indicates looting, which was punishable by death in the Red Army and could have made the Red Army look bad (Broekmeyer). Interestingly, while the Red Army indeed committed far worse atrocities than looting during WWII, the second "wristwatch" worn by the soldier is in fact most likely a standard-issue wrist-worn compass, widely used by Soviet troops in that era. This of course changes nothing, as it's indistinguishable from a wristwatch in the photo. Beyond this change, Soviet editors increased the image's contrast and added black smoke to the background to give the photo a more dramatic effect. While I personally think the original looks better, I understand the logic behind these alterations and consider the photo's overall validity still intact.

The image was taken with a Leica III 35mm rangefinder camera, produced in its original configuration from 1933-1939 and ironically of German origin (Baddeley). 35 mm film is a photographic film design introduced by Kodak in 1934. While digital photography has largely superseded film, 35 mm remains the most popular format when film is still used. Like many technologies, those seen in the Leica III and its 35mm film are the culmination of several earlier

technical discoveries relevant to capturing an image. Since its inception, the technology of capturing an analog image has relied on two fundamental principals: camera obscura and photosensitive materials. A camera obscura is a darkened box or room with a pinhole or lens at one end. When light passes through the hole, it projects an image of what's outside onto the inside wall of the camera obscura. This image can be captured by projecting it onto a photosensitive material. Photosensitive materials are those whose chemical composition changes upon exposure to light. By projecting the image from a camera obscura onto such a surface, the projection is imprinted on the material (Hirsch). This is the basis of photography.

The existence of photosensitive materials and camera obscura had always been known, but feasible techniques to use them together to capture images weren't developed until the early 19th century. The French inventor Nicéphore Niépce was the first to accomplish this in 1816 by exposing paper coated in silver chloride to a camera obscura projection. However, the technology still had a long way to go. Niépce's photographs were negatives of the projected image, darker in the areas that were exposed to more light, and there was no known way of correcting this. It was also unknown how to prevent the entire image from gradually darkening when removed from the camera obscura for viewing (Hirsch). Niépce next experimented with bitumen as the photosensitive material, which was applied to a metal plate and would harden in proportion to its exposure to light. However, this process required extremely long exposure of the bitumen to the projection, in excess of 8 hours, and the final product had to be lit and viewed in a special manner to look right.

After Niepce's death in 1833, his colleague Louis Daguerre continued his work and in 1839 introduced the Dagguerrotype, the first true and commercially viable form of photography. A dagguerrotype is produced by exposing a polished silver-plated copper sheet to a projection.

This imprints a "latent image" on it, similar to a fingerprint which can't be seen by the naked eye but is treated with chemicals to make it visible. Along the same lines, the latent image on the plate is revealed by fuming it with mercury vapor, which reacts with the silver and makes the image visible. Finally, it is further chemically treated to remove its sensitivity to light (Hirsch). While still complex and time-consuming, this was revolutionary and propelled photography into the mainstream.

The Leica III camera and its 35mm film, as well as each improved form of photography in between, is simply a further refinement of this concept. In fact, photography had come so far by the 1930s that the technology of the Leica III and its 35mm film is still used today, essentially unchanged. Modern camera films such as 35mm are rolls of a thin substrate film coated in a gelatin colloid that acts as the photosensitive material. These rolls are long enough for between 10 and 40 exposures, depending on the format. In the case of 35mm film, the roll is naturally 35mm in height. The gelatin colloid contains millions of microscopic, light-sensitive silver halide crystals, the properties of which (such as crystal size and density) determine the sensitivity, contrast, and resolution of the photography (Hirsch). The Leica III itself is basically a camara obscura box optimized for creating exposures on this film. A significant improvement over the daguerrotype, photos taken with 35mm film require only a split-second of exposure. Like Niepce's first exposures on silver chloride, those made by this modern technique are also negative, but by then chemical means of reversing this and "developing" the negatives into proper images had been invented. Thus this form of photography still requires special facilities to produce finished images, but this isn't as inconvenient as it sounds- one can simply drop off rolls of film to be professionally developed for a very reasonable price. Furthermore, modern film such as 35mm is much more resistant to unintentional darkening. Thus it still requires a basic

skill level from the photographer, but not nearly that required of a 19th-century daggerotypist.

That analog photography had virtually reached its apex by the 1930s illustrates the impressive technological advancement of the 19th and 20th centuries. One could argue that this technology has since been surpassed by digital photography, but this is subjective. Digital photography certainly offers more convenience and instant gratification, requires less skill to produce a quality image, and is more easily edited. However, film still offers superior versatility and image resolution, doesn't require batteries (flash notwithstanding), and can capture subtle details lost in digital photography. This makes film cameras, in my opinion, "future-proof" and immune to obsolecense. Timeless and powerful images such as these Red Army soldiers raising their flag atop the Reichstag, or U.S. marines raising theirs on Iwo Jima, owe their existence to this technology and will stand forever as testaments to the power of film and of photojournalism.

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